

A Certain Point of View

By Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi and Daniel Horne

"Heh, heh, Lieutenant, I think he's got you this time!" engineer Dap Nechel chuckled.

Lieutenant Celia Durasha ran her hand along the barrel of her blaster and glanced at Nechel. She knew how much the short, bearded alien enjoyed these ritual match-ups between the *Kuari Princess'* navigator and Detien Kaileel, the security chief. Their banter enlivened the luxury liner's routine passage along the Relgim Run between Endoraan and Mantooine.

"Just wait a minute now, Dap," she said, holstering the blaster and leaning across the holo gameboard to study her farangs and waroots. Celia frowned, her emerald-green eyes narrowed. The chief's last move had indeed given him the advantage.

Seated across from her, Security Chief Kaileel wore a grin -- at least Celia thought she detected a grin. The Kabieroun's long snout hid most of his mouth.

"Come now, my dear crimson-haired friend," Kaileel said, his Basic heavily accented, "shall we try another game?" Dark intelligent eyes twinkled, reflecting the yellowish-green light of the gameboard. He sat back, his giant frame obscuring the overstuffed pillows that decorated the sofas on the *Kuari Princess'* observation deck.

Shaking her head, Celia rolled her eyes. "Why is it, Dap," she kidded the engineer, "that I seem to lose every time you're around?"

Dap smiled at her mischievously, then winked at Kaileel. "I bring the Chief good luck!"

"I don't think I'm going to invite you to any more games!" Celia laughed, falling back onto the sofa. Sighing, she stared out the viewport at the mottled lights of stars rushing past them as the ship travelled through hyperspace. "Wish I had time for another game, Chief. We'll be coming up on Mantooine soon, and I'm supposed to be on the bridge."

Chief Kaileel nodded, muscles rippling along his elongated neck. "I imagine the captain would appreciate the presence of his best officers at their respective duty stations."

"Indeed," Dap agreed.

"I'll have some free time after we make orbit. Shall we get together, say, at 1930?" Celia asked.

"No good," the Chief replied. "I have some things to take care of on Mantooine. I won't be back until much later."

"Things to take care of, eh?" Celia kidded him, picking up her navaid datapad from the seat. "All right, Chief, when do I get to meet this new girlfriend you've been harboring on Mantooine?"

"And what about the ones on Aris and Vykos?" Dap added. Kaileel blushed a darker shade of green than normal and straightened in his seat. "No girlfriends," he told them, tugging at the earhoop hanging from his left lobe. "Just ... friends."

"Okay, if you say so," Celia replied, a sly smile tugging at the corner of her lip. Standing up, she brushed a stray red hair off the silky white sleeve of her uniform and carefully adjusted the blaster holstered around her hips. "Well, time for work, gentlebeings."

Dap took one last gulp of his drink and bounced down from the sofa. "Ah, yes," he said, "an engineer's work is never done. *Vetoosh*, friends."



"*Vetoosh*, Celia replied as Dap headed down the corridor. "Chief K?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Any progress on finding those missing blasters?"

Kaileel swung his massive head. "No," he said. "I'm afraid the captain will be unhappy with my report. I've been over this a dozen times with my security people. It's hard to believe one of them might be lying. But this is the third incident. All those blasters were in secure lockers in our offices. I just don't see how anyone else could have taken them."

"And they haven't turned up anywhere on the ship?"

"I've had scanning teams searching every centimeter of the *Princess*, though I don't expect to find them here," he said. "No, I'm afraid this last batch may have been smuggled off the ship at one of our port stops and will turn up in Rebel hands like those the Imperials discovered on Mantooine."

"You sound worried, Chief," Celia observed.

"This will not look good on my record, Lieutenant," Kaileel reminded her.

"Chief, your record is impeccable!" she told him. "You've got the best security team this side of the Rim!"

"With a dozen weapons missing?" he grimaced. "Thank you for your vote of confidence, little Crimson."

Nodding, Celia watched him rise, his huge form towering far above hers. "I'll talk with you when you return from Mantooine." She started to walk away, then turned back to face him. "I want my rematch!" she called. "You're not going to win again!"

* * *

The decks were crowded with passengers boarding the *Kuari Princess* on Mantooine for the return trip through the Maelstrom Nebula to Endoraan. Celia nodded politely to a group of Ithorians and three Corellian businessmen. She smiled at a young couple, still dressed in their wedding finery. Obviously on their honeymoon, they didn't seem to notice anything around them, only each other.

"Ticket, please," hostess Kelsa Vilrein asked a very wealthy-looking female passenger.

"Miss," the woman asked, "can you tell me where the observation deck is? I don't want to miss our entry into the Maelstrom. I've heard so much about it."

"That's on the Lido deck," Kelsa told her. "The captain will announce our approach. Of course, you realize we won't enter the Maelstrom for 15 hours."

"Yes, thank you, my dear."

Kelsa tipped her head toward Celia. "Good evening, Lieutenant."

"How are you, Kelsa?" Celia asked the dark-haired woman.

"Ticket, please," she replied, glancing down to check another passenger's accommodations. "Homthor Deck. That's up two levels." She winked at Celia. "I'm fine, Lieutenant."

"Has Chief Kaileel come back on board?" Celia asked.

"He returned about a half hour ago. Ticket, please."

"Thanks, Kelsa."

"Celia?"

The voice was familiar, but one she hadn't heard in a long time. Looking around, Celia stared wide-eyed. Her heart skipped a beat. "Adion? How in the worlds--"

"I'd recognize that red mane anywhere!" he exclaimed reaching out to take her hand. "Celia Durasha. Good skies! What are you doing so far from Lankashiir?"

"I'm the *Kuari Princess*' navigator. And look at you--""What do you think?" he asked, tugging at his tunic to straighten any part of the uniform that might dare to be out of place.

"Lieutenant ... hm," she said, eyeing his tall muscular frame. Adion Lang looked more handsome than she remembered. Maybe it's the uniform, she thought. "I like it."

"Celia, you look absolutely ravishing," he told her.

"Shh!" she replied, turning her head as the heat rose in her cheeks. "You're not allowed to embarrass the ship's navigator."

"All right, I'll try not to."

"I'm good friends with the Security Chief, Lieutenant Lang. Any misbehavior and I'll have him throw you in the brig!"

"Yes, ma'am," he grinned. "You haven't changed at all, Celia."

"Not one little bit!" she laughed. "Now, c'mon. Let's get out of the line of traffic." Leading him through the ship's corridors toward the observation deck, Celia couldn't help but notice the two white-armored shadows that followed them at a discrete distance. "Friends of yours?" she asked.

Adion glanced back. "Oh, them? Don't worry about them. Just a couple of guards who were lucky enough to accompany me," he replied nonchalantly. "Tell me, Celia, how long has it been?"

She thought for a moment. "Seven years, I guess."

"A long time," he said. "Tell me about you, your family. I'm afraid I've lost touch with your brothers."

"Well, Jak is still in the Navy, stationed on board the *Relentless*. Bern is a lieutenant with an armored battalion in the Generis Sector, and I just spoke with Raine last week. His unit was preparing to ship out to Ralltiir -- some kind of local trouble, I suppose. I miss them all terribly, but especially Raine."

"I guess that's natural -- he is your twin brother, after all," Adion said. "But what happened to all your grand plans? I thought you would attend the Academy like your brothers."

Celia frowned, unable to ignore the incoming tide of emotions that were attached to that subject.

Adion stopped in the middle of the corridor, obviously aware that he'd touched on a sore spot. "I'm sorry," he told her, taking her hand into his. "I can tell something's wrong."

"It's okay," Celia said as old feelings of anger flooded her senses. "My application was never forwarded past Sector."

"What! Who would do such a thing?"

Staring past Adion, her voice trembled, full of bitterness. "Commander Reise Durasha."

"Your father?"

Nodding, Celia walked away from Adion. She ran her hand along the gold handrail that lined the ornately-decorated corridor.

"But why?" Adion asked, taking two giant strides to catch up with her.



She stopped, planting her arms across her chest, and looked him straight in the eye. "I believe his words were, 'No daughter of mine is going to attend the Academy. It's no place for women,' or something to that effect."

Adion lowered his eyes, shuffling his feet on the ship's polished marble flooring. His silence stung louder than a thunderclap.

"You, too? You agree with him?" she asked, trying to temper her anger and hurt.

"Celia, you would have been remarkable at the Academy. But do you know where most women end up after graduation?"

She glared at him. She knew all right. Backwater worlds, crummy assignments, with little chance to prove yourself, or to ever see a promotion. But it never mattered to her. She had longed to wear the uniform, to proudly serve as others in her family had done for generations.

"Your father was only thinking of your well-being," Adion said.

"My well-being? Excuse me, why would he be so concerned about a daughter he barely knew."

"And yet you wanted to follow in his footsteps! See your family every three or four years, if it was convenient? Celia," he admonished her gently, "how can you still be upset with him after all these years?"

"He interfered with my life, Adion. He had no right to make that decision for me."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Can we drop this subject?" she asked. "You haven't told me what you're doing on the *Kuari Princess*."

Adion looped his arm through hers. "Show me your ship," he said, "and I'll tell you about my assignment to Aris."

"Aris? Sector HQ, eh?" she smiled, leading him up the grand staircase to the Lido observation deck. "I'm impressed. A plush job, no doubt."

"You are looking at the new assistant to the Moff," he told her.

"Congratulations, Adion! That's wonderful," she stopped, turning to look out one of the viewports. Mantooine loomed ahead of them, the glare of sunlight illuminating the horizon as the ship's orbit took them across the terminator into day. "It's so beautiful up here," she sighed. "But just wait until we enter the Maelstrom Nebula."

"I've heard about it," he said, his voice softening. "But it can't be as spectacular as the lovely red hair I used to tug on from my seat in physics classes." He pushed a loose curl away from her face then touched her lightly on the cheek. "I've missed you, Celia."

Celia blushed and looked away from him. Adion reached out to turn her face back toward his. Putting his arm around her waist, he pulled her close. Slowly, his lips met hers. For a brief moment neither one noticed the curious on-lookers who passed by.

Trembling, Celia pulled away from him. Old memories rushed in upon her senses. There may have been a time, years ago, when she would have followed him to the ends of the



galaxy. But then he'd left their homeworld to attend Raithal Academy and she hadn't seen or heard from him in all these years. Did he expect to pick up right where they'd left off?

Her eyes fixed on his. There was something different about him, something in those piercing blue eyes that she couldn't quite put her finger on. "I've got to go, Adion. We'll be leaving orbit soon and I'm supposed to be on duty now."

"May I see you later?" he asked.

"I--I'll check with you in the morning," she said, turning to leave. Confused by emotions he'd stirred deep within her, emotions she thought she'd left behind in the past, Celia hurried away. She needed time to think. Some safe harbor. And she knew exactly where to find it.

* * *

The door slid open into a modestly decorated office. A hologram on one wall displayed a cross section of the *Kuari Princess*. A dozen monitors occupied another wall to the right of a desk that was littered with a half dozen datacards.

Chief Kaileel was hunched over his computer terminal. He glanced up at Celia, a momentary look of annoyance vanished quickly, replaced by a gentler expression.

"Good evening, dear Crimson. May I help you with something?"

"I, uh, thought I'd get a brief update on those missing blasters, Chief," she said unconvincingly.

Kaileel's large dark eyes frowned at her over the top of the monitor. "I have nothing new to report, Lieutenant," he replied, eyeing her suspiciously. "Was there something else I might help you with?"

Celia's eyes wandered around the room. "I've got the bridge watch for another hour, then I'll be ready for our rematch."

Kaileel drummed his long green fingers on the desk. "It is rather late, you realize."

"You're not trying to get out of this game, are you?"

"Of course not, Lieutenant. I shall be off duty in two hours."

"Good," Celia replied, glad she'd have the game to keep her mind off a certain handsome Imperial lieutenant. "Then I'll expect you to meet me on the observation deck."

The edges of Kaileel's mouth curled upward behind his snout. "Oh, my dear little crimson-haired friend, I would not miss the chance to beat you again for all the spice on Kessel!"

"Beat me?" she smiled, her mood suddenly lighter. "Don't count on it, Chief!"

"Get to your bridge, little one. Drive your ship! Steer us a straight course!"

Leaning over the desk, Celia's face grew serious. "You look tired, Chief," she said. "Is everything all right?"

Kaileel leaned back into his chair. "Yes -- well, no," he admitted when he saw the frown on her face. "I had some disturbing news on my visit to Mantooine."

"Chief?" another voice called from the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt, Lieutenant."

"What is it, Raban?" Kaileel asked the security officer as Celia walked behind the desk to stare out the viewport.

"We've got a report of a fight between two passengers at the Galleria Shop."

"Who's on it?"

"Brankton. And we've sent in a backup."

"Keep me posted," Kaileel told the man, then turned to smile at Celia. "This may turn out to be an exciting cruise."

"We haven't even left orbit yet!" Celia marvelled.

"And you thought your job was interesting."

"Chief, what were you about to tell me -- the news you got on Mantooine?"

"Later, my dear. I'll tell you later."

Celia eyed her old friend. There was something bothering him. But before she could probe for more information the captain's voice sounded over the intercom. "Chief Kaileel, is Lieutenant Durasha with you?"

"Yes, Captain," Kaileel said.

"I was just on my way to the bridge, sir," Celia added.

"Lieutenant, I need to speak with you privately. Will you meet me in my office right away?"

"Of course, sir. On my way. I wonder what that's all about," she said as Kaileel clicked off the intercom. "I'll see you in a couple of hours, Chief."

* * *

"Captain Glidrick, you wanted to see me?"

"Please, Lieutenant, sit down," he said. Stern Glidrick was a middle-aged man with brownish hair that was just beginning to streak with gray. Like Celia, he was dressed in blue trousers with a gold stripe down each leg. Medals decorated his white tunic -- a reminder to everyone of his service in the Imperial Navy.

"What is it, sir? What's happened?"

"I received a message from your father --"

Celia stood up abruptly, her face reddening. "My father sent you a message?" she asked, the anger in her voice unmistakable.

"Please, Lieutenant--"

"I want nothing to do with him--"

"Lieutenant Durasha, sit down!" the captain ordered. He took a deep breath. "Your father sent word through me, because he knew what your reaction would be. It's about your brother--"

Celia paled. "What?" Her hands trembled as she grasped the edge of Glidrick's desk and collapsed into the chair.

"He's been killed," the captain told her. "I'm sorry."

Closing her eyes, Celia chewed on the inside of her lip, trying to force back the tears. "Captain, I have three brothers. Which one--"

Glidrick glanced down at the datapad. "It's Raine," he said. "Your father said there are more details on this holo that accompanied the message I received. Take all the time you need, Celia. I'm truly sorry."



"Thank you, sir," Celia replied numbly, taking the holo from him. She rose slowly from the chair and somehow managed to find her way to her quarters. Alone, Celia listened to the message. When it ended, she paused it, staring at her father's frozen holo image. The small room seemed to close in around her.

Unconsciously, Celia ran her hand back and forth across her holster, then downward, brushing against her soft leather boot. She unsheathed the knife hidden there. It had been a special gift from Raine, one he had given to her the night before he'd left for his last term of service. Sitting beneath Lankashiir's star-filled skies, they had reminisced about the good times they'd had exploring the forests of their homeworld.

She turned the knife over several times. Light from the holo image touched the steel gray blade and cascaded across the desk. Her small hand melded perfectly around its handle which was carved from rare ebon. She studied the flaming red jewel embedded just above the blade, watched it sparkle brilliantly even in the dimly lit cabin.

Good memories seemed no more than a distant echo now. Celia set the knife down, rubbed her hand wearily across her brow and clicked on her father's message again.

"Your brother Raine has been killed by Rebel forces on the planet Ralltiir," the figure in the holo said. Reise Durasha looked much older, and much thinner than when she'd seen him last. His graygreen Imperial Army uniform seemed to hang loosely on his bent frame. Dark shadows ringed his eyes. "I know how close you and Raine were ..."

Celia buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Emotionally exhausted, numb with grief, sleep finally ended her pain. When the cabin intercom buzzed more than an hour later, she awoke suddenly. Slowly, she reached over and clicked it on.

"Durasha here," she said wearily.

"Celia, I thought we had a game this evening." She stared blankly at the comm panel.

"Celia?" the Chief called again, more insistently.

"Oh, Chief," she finally said, "I forgot."

"Is everything all right?" he asked. "We don't have to play tonight--"

"No, just give me a few minutes."

When Celia arrived on the observation deck, the holo gameboard was darkened. A tall glass of some exotic beverage sat on the edge of the playing table.

"What's this?" Celia asked, pointing toward the drink.

"Zadarian brandy. You sounded like you could use a good stiff drink," Kaileel told her.

Celia blinked a tear from her eye. She picked up the brandy, swirled it around the glass thoughtfully, and finally took a long sip. The brew trickled down her throat, but its warmth did nothing to diminish the chill she felt. She could feel the Chief's eyes upon her. "What has happened?" he asked.

Staring out at the stars blurring past them in hyperspace, Celia didn't seem to hear him.

"Celia?" He stood up, placing his hand lightly on her shoulder. Trembling, Celia turned toward Kaileel and looked up into his eyes.

"My brother--" she cried, burying her face in his chest.

Kaileel wrapped his long scaly arms around her. He held her tightly. "I'm so sorry, my dear little Crimson," he said.

When her tears dried, Celia told her old friend how Raine's unit had been ambushed by Rebels at the spaceport on Ralltiir. Kaileel shook his head sadly. "So many will die," he said quietly. "On both sides."

Celia's eyes grew wide. "You don't support the Rebel cause, do you?"

"Let's just say I disagree with the Empire's methods of resolving this conflict," he told her.

"What do you mean, Chief?"

Kaileel gazed out the viewport. "Think of the Maelstrom Nebula, Celia," he said.

"What about it?"

"From Mantooine -- how does it appear?"

"It's barely a speck," she replied.

"True," he nodded. "What happens when we enter the Nebula?" She threw him a puzzled look.

"Is this a class in astrophysics, Chief?"

"Please, follow along with me," he said.

"All right. When we enter the Nebula our communications don't work well. And our sensors are blinded. But what does that have to do with--"

Kaileel held up one long green finger. "From a great distance we can only surmise the hazards the Nebula may present to us. Why is it that until we're close, until it touches us, we don't recognize the danger?"

"The Empire is like that, little Crimson. From a distance, we may not feel the danger -- we're too far removed from its touch. But once it is upon us, we will hear and see only what the Empire desires."

"My family serves that Empire, Chief. My brother died fighting for it, too," she reminded him. "You'd better not let others hear you speak like this. They might suspect you were the one who stole those--" she stopped mid-sentence, sitting up abruptly, and leaned over the holo gameboard.

Kaileel eyed her, then thoughtfully swirled the reddish liqueur in his own glass.

"You gave those blasters to Rebels on Mantooine?" she asked quietly. "Was *that* the business you had to attend to?"

Before the Chief could answer, Dap Nechel bounded into the room.

"Why didn't you tell me you were playing?" he asked, his voice filled with an exaggerated anguish.

Celia fell back onto the overstuffed pillows. She looked from Kaileel to Dap, then turned away. Kaileel straightened in his seat and took a long slow sip from his drink.

"I'm sorry," Dap said. "I seem to have interrupted a private conversation. I'll go now."

"No, it's okay, Dap," Celia said. "Stay. We were just setting up the board." She pressed a button on the side of the game table. A greenish glow lit their faces and a dozen warriors appeared, standing at attention, weapons held at right-shoulder arms, on each side of the holo board.

"Celia, we don't have to play--" Kaileel began.

"It's all right, Chief," she said. "Your move."

As Dap climbed onto the sofa next to Celia, Kaileel positioned his warroot. Celia moved one of her farangs. Chief countered by advancing another one his warriors.

Celia studied the gameboard. Sitting up, she pulled her blaster from its holster and rubbed her hand along the barrel contemplatively. "Hmm, Chief," she said, "that was not a wise move."

"Really? I believe it all depends on your point of view," he replied.

"My point of view?" she frowned.

"Open your eyes, dear Crimson. Look at what is happening all around you."

Dap eyed his two friends. "What are you two talking about?" he asked. "Will one of you please tell me?"

Celia looked away.

"Celia's brother was killed by Rebels on Ralltiir."

"Oh, dear. That's terrible, Lieutenant. I had heard about the insurrection there on the holo newsvid. But the Empire is dealing with those Rebels," he said. "And the ones on Alderaan. Yes, indeed. They won't be giving the Empire any more trouble."

"Alderaan?" the Chief asked.

"Good skies, have you not heard the news -- well, no, I guess not if you've been sitting here the last hour."

"What has happened on Alderaan?" Celia repeated.

"The Emperor's servants discovered that several of the leaders of the Rebellion were from Alderaan -- Bail Organa himself, and his daughter, the *Princess* Leia. Our forces have made an example of that world."

"What do you mean?"

"Alderaan has been destroyed."

"What!" Celia exclaimed.

Kaileel shook his head sadly. "Did I not tell you this?"

"The whole planet?"

"It's nothing but billions of particles of dust now," Dap said. "Millions of people, like pawns," Kaileel said, pointing at the characters on their gameboard, "for the Emperor to do with what he will."

"But, Chief--"

"I fear the game is up," Kaileel said softly.

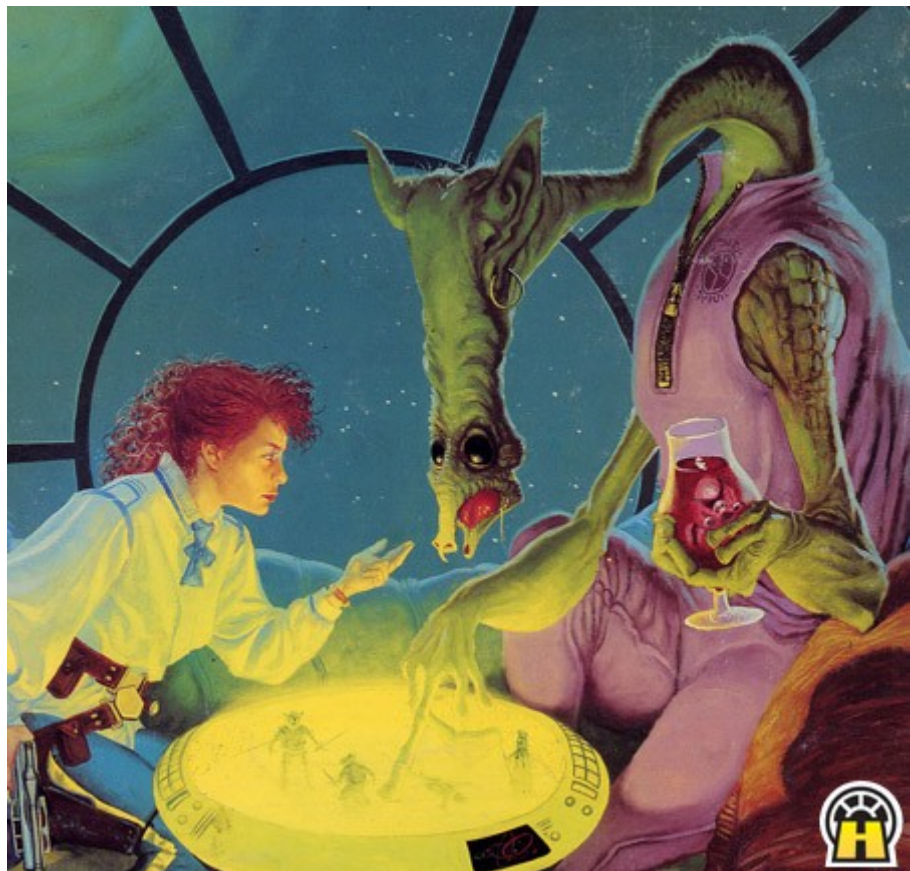
Frowning, Celia leaned over the gameboard to check their warriors' positions. "You're not giving up that easily," she said, suddenly catching Dap's startled expression out of the corner of her eye.

Chief Kaileel exhaled deeply, letting out a big sigh. Celia looked up. Two stormtroopers had blaster rifles aimed at her friend.

"Indeed, Rebel spy," Adion Lang's voice rang out menacingly. He stepped out from behind the stormtroopers. "The game is up."

"Adion!" Celia exclaimed, carefully holstering her blaster. "What's the meaning of this?" She made a point of standing slowly, not wanting to alarm the stormtroopers. "Chief Kaileel is no spy."

"Please, Celia, don't try to defend this traitor. We know all about this," he paused, searching for the right description, "creature's activities. We have proof that he has supplied weapons to Rebel agents on Mantooine. And considering the conversation I've just overheard--"



"You've been spying on us!" Dap exclaimed.

"That is my job. I'm sorry, Celia, that this... thing... has cultivated your friendship. Just remember what his friends have done to your brother," Adion said. "Raine would still be alive if it weren't for traitors like him."

His cold words cut into Celia's heart like a vibroblade. She'd lost her brother to the Rebels. And now she was losing her best friend to the Empire. She looked at Kaileel -- she would never blame him for Raine's death. She hoped he could see that in her eyes.

"It's all right, dear Crimson," Kaileel told her. "I am only one. But the Empire will soon learn that the ones will multiply by the hundreds of thousands. And one day, we shall not be put down."

"Take him away," Adion ordered the stormtroopers.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," Dap said. "If you'll not be needing me, may I go?"

"Yes, Chief Nechel," Adion told him, "though I may ask for a statement from you later."

"I see," Dap replied. "Yes, indeed, whatever you require. You know where I'll be."

Celia watched them put binders on Kaileel's wrists. His strong muscular arms twitched nervously as he stood up. Towering above them, he would have been an intimidating sight if it weren't for the blaster rifles they had trained on him.

"Move it," one stormtrooper ordered Kaileel, shoving his rifle into the chief's chest.

"Take him to ship's security and keep a close eye on him, Sergeant," Adion ordered. "Remember, he knows that place better than anyone on this ship."

"Yes, sir."

As they led Kaileel away, Celia stared after them. "What will happen to him, Adion?"

"Dear Celia, don't concern yourself with these details," he replied, reaching out to take her hand.

"I don't understand this, Adion. I thought you were an administrative aide."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry I had to lie to you, Celia. I'm with the Imperial Security Bureau. We've been watching your security chief for several months now."

"I thought I knew him so well. I never suspected--" she said, covering her face with her hands.

Adion took Celia into his arms. "There, now," he said, "everything will be all right. Come, sit down with me."

"Gentlebeings," a voice rang out over the ship's intercom. "This is Captain Glidrick. In approximately 30 minutes, the *Kuari Princess* will emerge from hyperspace to enter the Maelstrom Nebula. You won't want to miss the spectacular view from the Lido Deck's observation ports. It will be a sight you will never forget."

"The Nebula--" Celia sighed. Kaileel's comparison of the Empire and the nebula filled her mind ... *until it touches you, you may not realize the danger it presents.*

"Forget what that old creature said to you, Celia. His thoughts are dangerous."

Celia looked up into Adion's blue eyes. They seemed cold and vacant. Who was right? Empire? Rebel? She'd been hurt by both of them. Could she ever embrace one or the other? She didn't know what to think anymore. "I've got to talk to him, Adion."

"That's not a good idea, Celia."

"Please -- just for a few minutes."

"I will have to question him first, but before we reach Aris I'll let you see him."

Nodding weakly, she rested her head on Adion's shoulder.

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The cell door slid shut behind her. Celia stood rigidly, staring at Kaileel. After more than 10 hours, she was finally able to talk to him, just as Adion Lang had promised.

Shaking her head, she placed her nav-aid datapads on the chest just inside the door and began pacing back and forth across Kaileel's cell. Her hand nervously fingered her empty holster.

"You admitted it!" she finally shouted at Kaileel.

"What else was I to do, Lieutenant?" he asked her.

Stopping dead in her tracks in front of him, Celia rolled her eyes in disgust. "Lie!"

Kaileel stared past her as if looking out some nonexistent viewport. "To what end? My dear little Crimson," he said, turning to look into her eyes, "I know you are not that naive."

Celia clenched her fists and pounded Kaileel's muscular chest. "I just don't understand, Chief!" she cried. "What has the Empire done to you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you get yourself mixed up with these Rebels?"

"What the Empire is doing is wrong," he told her, "it's immoral. Remember what I told you -- that certain point of view -- stop looking at the Empire from a distance. Take a look up close, Celia. You will see. All freedom-loving beings know this is true." He took her hand into his, pressing it closely to his chest. "And I know, deep in my heart, that one day you will understand."

Staring up into his huge black eyes, Celia pushed down the lump in her throat. "I just don't know, Chief--"

The door into the cell slid open.

"Time's up, Lieutenant. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

"But it's only been a couple of minutes. Can't I stay a little while longer, Sergeant?"

"I've got my orders, Lieutenant."

The stormtrooper motioned her toward the door. Celia frowned at Kaileel. She finally walked away from him, stopping to glance back one last time.

"I still want my rematch with you, Chief!" she told him, reaching for the datapads on the chest. "I won't let them take you off this ship until I get a rematch!"

The datapads slipped from Celia's hands, clattering to the floor. She bent down to retrieve them, inconspicuously withdrawing the knife from her boot. Standing abruptly, she drove the knife under the stormtrooper's helmet and into his neck. He screamed in pain as she forcefully pulled him out of the doorway, bashing his head against the wall. Her hands shaking, she twisted the blade one last time as the trooper collapsed to the floor.

"C'mon, Chief," she said, re-sheathing the knife in her boot, "we've got to get out of here!"

A second stormtrooper appeared in the doorway. Diving to the floor, Celia recovered the fallen trooper's blaster rifle and opened fire. Her shot nicked the wall as the stormtrooper backed away from the door. Jumping to her feet, Celia scrambled to the doorway and blasted him as he ran down the corridor.



"Let's go, Chief!" she shouted, throwing the blaster rifle back to him.

Following her, Kaileel stepped over the two dead stormtroopers. "Tell me, dear Crimson, do you really expect us to get out of here alive?" he asked. "Where's the rest of our security people?"

"Dap arranged for a little problem on the Bazaar Deck," she said, retrieving the second blaster rifle.

"Good old Dap. You think the turbolift's the best way down to the hangar bay?"

"Should be all clear, Chief."

"Amazing."

"You've got a lot of friends on board the *Princess*, old man!"

"Is there a barge--"

"Already prepped. I disconnected the robot pilot and did a little rewire job so I could fly it out of here."

"And into the Maelstrom," the Chief added. "We'll be safe there."

Thirty seconds later the turbolift doors opened onto the luxury liner's dimly lit hangar. Two barges which were used for piloting passengers to and from the ship occupied the high-ceilinged room. Peering into the bay, Celia motioned for Kaileel to follow her.

They were halfway across the bay when Adion Lang walked down the ramp of the nearest barge. His blaster was pointed toward Chief Kaileel, but his eyes were transfixed on Celia.

"Put your blasters down," he ordered them.

Celia stared at the blaster in her hand. "Adion, please," she said, her voice trembling, "let Kaileel go."

"I was afraid you'd try something like this, Celia. You always were rather impetuous. But I think you know I can't let him go," he told her. "Now, please, put your blaster down. You don't want to kill me."

Celia searched Adion's eyes. There was no emotion there, no spark of life. It can't end like this, she thought. *There's got to be something I can do.*

Chief Kaileel moved slowly to lower his blaster. "I'm sorry, little Crimson," he said, suddenly jerking the rifle up to fire at Adion. His first shot went wide. Half a heartbeat later, a blast from Adion's rifle caught him across the chest. Kaileel managed to get off a second shot, but it ricocheted wildly, bouncing off the hull of the barge. Kaileel collapsed, mortally wounded, onto the cold metallic floor of the hangar bay.

Celia dropped her blaster rifle and rushed toward her fallen friend. "You didn't have to kill him!" she screamed at Adion. Tears threatened to blur her vision. But she forced them away as she knelt beside Kaileel's body.

Adion approached her cautiously, kicking both blaster rifles across the hangar floor. "Why, Celia? Why were you helping him escape?" he asked her. "You're no Rebel."

"He was my friend," she said quietly, ignoring the contempt she heard in



Adion's voice. She wondered what had happened to the young man she'd once admired, the man she had loved.

"You'll have to come with me, Celia," Adion said.

"Don't make me, Adion," she told him, her eyes still fixed on Kaileel's body for fear they might betray her true feelings. "Won't you let me leave?"

"It's my duty, Celia," he said coldly, his blaster trained on the back of her head. "You're under arrest for treasonous acts against the Empire."

Celia picked up Kaileel's limp hand, tenderly running her fingers across it. "Looks like this game's going nowhere, Chief," she told him. "How will I ever get my rematch?"

Adion moved a step closer, his tall frame casting a dark shadow across Kaileel's face. His leg brushed up against Celia's back and she cringed at his touch.

"Get up, Celia."

A tear trickled down her cheek. Slowly, she turned and looked back at Adion. Her hand slipped unnoticeably toward her boot. Her fingers clamped around the handle of the knife.

"Get up," Adion repeated, grabbing her left arm, dragging her up so that their faces were barely centimeters apart. He shook his head, and for one brief moment Celia thought she detected a hint of regret. Then his blue eyes narrowed. Blinded by his own hatred, Adion never noticed the flash of steel until Celia slashed him across the arm.

His eyes grew wild as he cried out in pain. The blaster slipped from his hand and skittered across the floor as Celia lashed out again. Trying to protect himself from the attack, Adion lost his grip on her. She fled across the hangar and up the ramp of the barge.

As the hatch slid shut she could hear Adion shouting her name. "Celia, don't do this!"

Seconds later, the barge lifted off the floor of the hangar bay. The small transport slipped quietly outside into the swirling Maelstrom Nebula.

From the viewport, Celia watched the *Kuari Princess* fade as the barge moved away from the luxury liner and deeper into the nebula.

"Stalemate, Chief," she nodded to herself. A bitterness crept into her voice. "Nobody wins this round."